Orlando Sentinel
April 18, 2005

Our Position: Don't Let Big Sugar Kill the Central American Free-Trade Agreement

Finally, Congress has begun considering a free-trade agreement with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic.

CAFTA-DR would be a boon for exporters and consumers, strengthen the economies of fragile democracies on America's doorstep and pave the way for bigger trade treaties.

Yet Big Sugar is flexing its lobbying muscles, trying to kill the agreement because it would allow a tiny increase in sugar imports from the six countries. A defeat in Congress for CAFTA-DR would be a victory for the already-protected U.S. sugar industry, but a huge loss overall for the United States and its six partners.

Congressional approval of the treaty would bring down barriers to trade in goods and services between the United States and Central America, opening markets for exporters and lowering prices for consumers. More opportunities for exporters in the CAFTA-DR countries would spur economic growth there, bolstering support for its current crop of democratic leaders while expanding the market for U.S. products. And there are provisions in the pact to strengthen enforcement of worker rights and environmental protections in the CAFTA-DR countries.

Currently over half of U.S. trade with those countries moves through Florida airports and seaports. A free-trade pact would expand business for Florida ports and add to the more than 500,000 trade-related jobs in the state.

Under pressure from the sugar industry, U.S. trade negotiators agreed to allow an increase in sugar imports from the CAFTA-DR countries equivalent to just 1.2 percent of U.S. sugar consumption in the treaty's first year, and less than 2 percent by the 15th year. If that's enough to sink the sugar industry, it's got far bigger problems.

The U.S. sugar industry already is coddled through government restrictions on imports and other measures that prop up sugar prices in this country. Those measures hurt consumers, from households to bulk buyers such as cereal companies.

If Congress knuckles under to Big Sugar's lobbying and rejects CAFTA-DR, the United States could lose its economic influence in Central America. European Union countries and China have been forging closer trade ties throughout Latin America.

A defeat for CAFTA-DR also could doom the larger effort to create a hemisphere-wide free-trade zone, the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Miami is the leading U.S. candidate to serve as headquarters for the FTAA, a designation that could create thousands of new jobs in the state and add billions of dollars to the state's annual economic output.

As they decide whether to support CAFTA-DR, Congress will need to choose: Are they more interested in promoting economic opportunity throughout the hemisphere, or protecting Big Sugar?